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Developing A Scholarly Voice Early: Collaborative Writing as a Pedagogy

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 12 first-year students in a doctoral education program by examining students' self-assessment of scholarly writing skills development during a collaborative writing experience. Cognitive apprenticeship served as the theoretical framework for this study, offering an instructional paradigm of situated learning activities to teach knowledge and skills through guided tasks, culminating in diminished dependence on faculty as cognitive skills develop. The study returned three emergent themes reflecting students' experiences in developing a scholarly voice: (1) the importance of feedback to writing growth, (2) the nature of writing as an iterative process, and (3) establishing publication as a motivation to improve writing. Implications for faculty and programs suggest that students benefit from feedback in a variety of settings, and that collaborative writing, as path to publishing, contributes to scholarly voice development early in a doctoral program.

Keywords: Scholarly Voice; Collaborative Writing; Pedagogy; Cognitive Apprenticeship; Feedback; Writing, Publishing

Scholarly writing skills are a requirement to successfully advance through a doctoral program's major milestones of coursework, comprehensive exams, proposal defense, and dissertation defense. Students begin doctoral programs with writing skills and styles as diverse as the academic backgrounds and professional experiences each candidate represents. Transitioning from undergraduate-level or professional writing toward a scholarly writing style, using each genre's requisite vocabulary and style, and gaining the confidence to employ an authoritative voice can be challenging for new doctoral students (Gennrich & Dison, 2018). As students prepare to become practitioners or academics in fields which require strong writing skills, it is imperative that doctoral candidates develop and exercise a scholarly voice in a variety of settings before graduation.

A scholarly voice can be developed through continuous exposure to the writing standard of academic research, mentorship from faculty, and accumulating writing experience replicating authoritative voices found in the extant literature. The pedagogy of developing scholarly writing skills is widely considered a social and collaborative educational activity (Bartkowski et al., 2015; Collins et al., 1991;

Cotterall, 2011; Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010). As such, doctoral programs offering collaborative writing opportunities as part of the curriculum provide students an opportunity to realize identity transformation, from student to scholar, in a guided and psychologically safe environment.

Research indicates that students struggle with developing the elements of scholarly writing (Cotterall, 2011; Gennrich & Dison, 2018; Holmes et al., 2018; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Pare, 2010). Collaborative writing opportunities serve as a heuristic method for doctoral students to gain practice using a scholarly voice and to boost self-efficacy early in a program. Aitchison (2010) highlighted that writing groups remain understudied as a pedagogical tool to not only help students develop writing skills, but to become positioned in a field's discourse. To fill that gap, this study explored the experiences of 12 first-year students in a doctoral education program by examining students' self-assessment of scholarly writing skills development as it pertained to a collaborative writing experience. This research contributes to the literature about collaborative writing projects as an effective and efficient pedagogical tool to help doctoral students develop a scholarly voice.

The sections of this article include the literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion, and implications and future research.

Literature Review

Developing a Scholarly Voice

The literature abounds with pedagogical practices and recommendations to assist doctoral students develop a scholarly voice for academic writing. Yet, candidates remain challenged and anxious about the stylistics of transforming thoughts into writing to satisfy this nebulous academic standard (Cotterall, 2011; Gennrich & Dison, 2018; Holmes et al., 2018; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Pare, 2010). This section provides a brief literature review about what a scholarly voice is, why it is important to have one, and how to develop a scholarly voice.

Despite a plethora of discussion about the requirement for doctoral students to establish a scholarly voice and to develop academic writing skills, a single, standard definition does not exist (Cotterall, 2011; Gennrich & Dison, 2018; Robbins, 2016). Instead, a scholarly voice can be described as more of a concept about which researchers have imparted a myriad of interpretations and suggestions. Understandably, doctoral students' difficulty in grasping this concept is not unfounded and deservedly provokes a sense of empathy from the educators guiding new scholars.

The literature characterized the scholarly voice concept with a collage of descriptors. Aguilar (2018) described it as the product of one's training, demonstrating a scholar's research interests, methodological inclination, areas of expertise, publications, and reputation. Robbins (2018) expressed it as a creation,

style, and identity, enabling a scholar to project a point of view or stance, and the ability to advance a perspective with originality and credibility. Gennrich and Dison (2018) explained voice as an expression of critical examination of established truths and assumptions based on a writer's reasoning, analysis, investigation, and self-reflection. The variety of ambiguous descriptions justifiably mystify doctoral students new to academic writing.

Accumulating the training, practice, and confidence to marshal such characterizations into a scholarly voice is a transformative, yet arduous process that takes time, patience, and mentorship. Cotterall (2011) explained that doctoral writers exhibit reluctance to communicate ideas with an authoritative stance because student scholars do not yet self-identify as experts. Gennrich and Dison (2018) highlighted students' struggle with channeling theory to support one's position, and have not yet developed the skills to navigate the boundaries and balance between employing extant knowledge and expressing original thought.

A scholarly voice is important because it is the first impression readers perceive about a writer's authority, confidence, and command of the material. Demonstrating skilled use of a discipline's lexicon and discourse is how scholars are judged (Bartkowski et al., 2015). Robbins (2018) described academic writing as "notoriously bad" (p. 194) and that newcomers are quickly exposed because of the inability to address a community's dialogue (Pare, 2010). For these reasons, it is imperative that faculty guide students through diverse writing opportunities to develop a scholarly voice early in a doctoral program.

Voice development can be especially difficult for doctoral candidates lacking the cultural capital and awareness of the norms, values, and expectations of an academic community (Aitchison, 2010; Gennrich & Dison, 2018). Assuming doctoral programs comprise a large proportion of working students, candidates must negotiate the duality of identity, being student scholars in an academic setting—and professionals and practitioners in a work setting (Holmes et al., 2018). This duality requires identity transformation to occur, not only from novice to expert in students' respective fields of doctoral study, but transitioning from the customary vernacular of students' diverse professions to the vernacular expectations of the academe (Cotterall, 2011; Holmes et al., 2018).

How to develop a scholarly voice is copiously addressed in the literature, yet students contend with aggregating the myriad of conceptual definitions to formulate a voice. The transformational process of academic writing is frequently highlighted as a collaborative and social activity (Austin, 2009; Collins et al., 1991; Pare, 2010; Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010; Thein & Beach, 2010). As such, faculty and students have critical roles and responsibilities in the social and academic exchange of scholarly voice development.

Faculty's role is to socialize students to the norms of scholarly writing through practice, style emulation, and analysis of a field's literature (Austin, 2009; Bartkowski et al., 2015). Research by Holmes et al. (2018) highlighted that front-loading doctoral programs with academic writing education and exposure to writing resources not only sets the expectation for scholarly standards, but addresses students' writing anxiety with immediate actionable techniques. Furthermore, faculty must create a safe and encouraging environment in which students feel comfortable displaying writing samples for critique and receiving constructive feedback from professors and peers (Cotteral, 2011).

Students' role in scholarly identity transformation is described by Austin (2009) as an apprenticeship experience, charging students with reading and analyzing a field's literature to develop a voice and to emulate the scholarly conventions of academic writing (Austin, 2009). Pare (2010) emphasized students' responsibility to engage in a community's history, conversation, and ideology and to find one's voice within it, which requires the development of vocabulary and rhetorical practice. Students must accept the role of apprentice and remain persistent and resilient through the challenges of trial and error to build confidence and to develop a sense of agency (Badenhorst & Xiaoline, 2016; Bartkowski et al., 2015).

To further develop writing as a socially situated learning experience, the following section reviews the literature about collaborative writing as a pedagogy toward scholarly voice development.

Collaborative Writing as a Pedagogy

Team writing for weekly assignments, end of semester group projects, consortium presentations, and co-writing journal articles are among common pedagogical techniques to leverage collaborative writing activities toward the objective of scholarly voice development. Research indicated that experiential learning outcomes of collaborative writing activities include identity development, scholarship, transferrable skills and practices, task and milestone management, and the ability to navigate group dynamics (Aitchinson, 2010; Austin, 2009; Badenhorst & Xiaoline, 2016; Collins et al., 1991; Cotterall, 2011; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Pare, 2010; Reis, 2000; Stoilescu & McDougall, 2010; Thein & Beach, 2010). This section provides a brief literature review about the pedagogical situations faculty can create with collaborative writing activities and describes how such experiences help students achieve learning objectives.

Faculty's role in creating pedagogical situations that socialize doctoral students to a genre's discourse and stylistic expectations are imperative for identity transformation. Cotteral (2011) suggested students' writing experiences and learning trajectories are strongly influenced by faculty's role in inducting students

into a field's writing practice. This process of enculturation can be accelerated by students' situated participation in writing endeavors with faculty (Pare, 2010).

Socially situated co-writing activities with a faculty lead provide the student apprentice an opportunity to model target skills for future professional participation (Bartkowski et al., 2015; Collins et al., 1991; Pare, 2010). Cotterall (2011) posited that pairing new doctoral students with faculty or experienced student writers to co-author an article provides the student with access to feedback, support, resources, and a network of academic professionals. Experienced writers can mentor junior writers by designing an outline, writing the first sentence or paragraph to situate the student on a successful path, and sharing one's own previous work to use as a model (Cotterall, 2011).

A similarly beneficial collaborative pedagogy is facilitating socially situated critique and feedback sessions of students' writing. Austin (2009) stressed the mutual responsibility among peers to provide productive support and respectful critique as members of a learning community. Faculty can exponentially improve students' writing skills in a collaborative setting by offering practical application exercises and controlling academic environmental factors. Exercises that collaboratively analyze literature to teach writing stylistics and voice development can be incorporated from a variety of literary sources. From dissecting sections of published dissertation chapters to analyzing co-written articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, each method offers students exposure to valid examples of scholarly writing to model.

Practical exercises using students' writing present an abundance of learning opportunities to critique group assignments, individual papers, and draft dissertation manuscripts. Collins et al. (1991) stated that students new to academic writing have "no understanding of how the authors produced such text" (p. 2) and suggested that developing cognitive strategies are essential to being able to model quality writing. Peer review of written work in a group setting, by making it visible for classmate and faculty critique, amplifies this critical skill development (Collins et al., 1991). The pedagogical technique of a peer review culture, in which students feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback, relies on faculty's creation of an academic environment that is respectful, psychologically safe, and threat-free (Cotterall, 2011; Holmes et al., 2018; Pare; 2010)

Beyond the task of learning to write in a scholarly voice, lies a different and equally important skill set for students to develop—learning about and serving in various roles of a collaborative writing team. The ability to organize and manage a project and navigate group dynamics is critical to starting and finishing a collaborative writing task. Experiencing different roles on a writing team, by serving in both a lead writer and team member capacity, empowers students with valuable insight into the range of responsibilities and the inherent challenges of each role.

From a project management perspective, successful writing team members must have a clear understanding of the division of labor and a strong sense of responsibility and accountability to the group (Thein & Beach, 2010). Bartkowski et al. (2015) suggested that delineating roles early, clearly articulating and managing expectations, maintaining timelines, and resiliency are critical functions of the group writing process. Depending on the project's nature, team leads can be responsible for developing an overall team writing plan, outline, timeline, managing communication, researching the literature toward which team members would be vectored for use in the project, assigning sections for members to write, conducting progress meetings, providing feedback, editing the manuscript into a single voice, or even sourcing potential journals for submission. Motivating the team to achieve such tasks requires congenial and polished personnel management skills.

From a group dynamic perspective, it is important to consider the variety of learning opportunities that should be afforded to each member of the group. While repeatedly leveraging one group member's strength may be tempting, offering roles that develop a different capability, or remediate a weakness, should be encouraged to develop skills and versatility. Stoilescu and McDougall (2010) posited that building a team with varying levels of experience can be beneficial to the learning and networking process. Balancing members' strengths and weaknesses offers not only efficiencies to the project but provides both mentoring and learning opportunities (Bartkowski et al., 2015). Most importantly, peer review of role and responsibility performance should be conducted with empathy and professionalism, as group members may have varied levels of capability and experience.

The following section discusses the theoretical framework that underpins this study about collaborative writing as a pedagogical tool in scholarly voice development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned within the theoretical framework of cognitive apprenticeship. Situated learning activities that teach knowledge and skills to understand and solve abstract concepts help students develop cognitive skills (Austin, 2009). Collins et al. (1991) theorized that cognitive apprenticeship can be applied to writing skills using an instructional paradigm of observable activities that "makes thinking visible" (p. 1). Pare (2010) described a doctoral student's process of learning to write as a participative transition—from apprentice to professional, under the supervision of a successful mentor.

Cognitive apprenticeship is grounded in traditional apprenticeship, which teaches a student how to do a task through a series of phases. Each phase applies an instructional paradigm of diminishing dependence on faculty as students develop competence, using the methodologies of modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploring (Collins et al., 1991). The social context of collaborative writing and peer review critique activities can be applied to the theoretical notion of cognitive apprenticeship, as students belong to a subculture of participants learning the same target skill of writing (Collins et al., 1991).

Collins et al. (1991) adapted traditional apprenticeship to a cognitive skills development model that advocated for three instructional techniques and are applicable to collaborative activities in the context of scholarly voice development. The authors suggested faculty endeavor to: (1) identify and make visible the processes of the tasks, (2) situate abstract tasks in authentic contexts to facilitate students' understanding and relevance of the work, and (3) diversify learning situations and highlight common aspects to promote the transfer of learning to other tasks (Collins et al., 1991).

This study was conducted within the conceptual framework of cognitive apprenticeship and the researchers' analysis is presented.

Methodology

This study sought to examine the utility of collaborative writing projects as effective and efficient pedagogical tools to help doctoral students develop a scholarly voice. The researchers focused on first-year students in a doctoral education program and examined students' self-assessment of scholarly writing skills development in the context of a collaborative writing experience. This study analyzed archival data obtained from a post-academic residency survey of 12 doctoral students of education at a mid-western university.

The utilization of archival data, including surveys and questionnaires, allowed the researchers to analyze what was observed by participants who experienced the same phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The archival data was in a survey format and served useful to gain insight into the reflective thinking of doctoral students' experiences throughout the initial phase of the program. Program faculty administered the survey as the final reflection of the academic residency experience. All students enrolled in the course, comprising seven female students and five male students, completed the survey. All 12 participants are currently employed as instructors or administrators in educational organizations at the elementary, secondary, or post-secondary level.

Qualitative researchers conceive of programs as dynamic, and the use of survey questions or questionnaires are effective tools to track program dynamics and participant outcomes. Therefore, surveys provide context for naturalistic

inquiry (Patton, 2015). Given this context, the researchers deemed the summative survey as the most effective evaluation method for this study.

The survey comprised 15 questions to solicit students' perceptions about various aspects of the doctoral residency experience, with particular attention paid to collaborative writing. The assessment included one Likert scale question and 14 open-ended questions. The five survey questions that follow yielded data about writing skills, which were applicable to this research endeavor. The first question elicited responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The remaining four open-ended questions elicited a discursive response and provided thick and rich descriptions typical of a qualitative design methodology. The survey questions were:

- Question 1: I have more confidence in becoming a scholarly writer.
- Question 2: What part of residency was most helpful in advancing your writing skills?
- Question 3: What activities addressed your concerns/anxieties about starting a doctoral program?
- Question 10: Describe how the different types of feedback impacted your writing.
- Question 14: What have you learned about research writing?

Results

The single Likert scale question in the summative survey queried students' perceptions about having more confidence in becoming a scholarly writer, to which 91.67% of respondents answered "strongly agree," and 8.33% of students answered "agree." Four of the 14 open-ended questions in the summative survey yielded data applicable to this study. The data is categorized into three emergent themes: (1) importance of feedback to writing growth, (2) the nature of writing as an iterative process, and (3) establishing publication as a motivation to improve writing.

Emergent Theme 1: Importance of Feedback to Writing Growth

Respondents wrote that feedback, in its many iterations, was pivotal to growth in writing skills. Timeliness and frequency were two critical aspects of feedback that respondents noted when asked about the aspects of residency that was most helpful in advancing one's writing skills. When asked about varying forms of feedback that impacted writing skills, participants responded with comments about opportunities to receive feedback from faculty and peers. Respondents also discussed how "making the work visible," through an open review process, allowed for a more critical observation of one's own writing, as well as to engage in a process of self-reflection.

Emergent Theme 2: The Nature of Writing as an Iterative Process

Survey respondents noted that learning the “formula” and structure for research writing is foundational to the writing process. Additionally, participants cited that being attentive to active and passive voice with clear and concise sentences, minimal use of personal pronouns, and proofreading are pivotal to the intensive process of academic writing.

Emergent Theme 3: Establishing Publication as a Motivation for Writing Improvement

When asked about concerns regarding doctoral study, student participants noted that one’s own lack of a vision for the program was a cause of anxiety. One of the major focal points of academic residency is having the students publish a group academic writing product. Survey respondents iterated that faculty had a vision of early publication, and this aspect of the vision worked as a motivating factor to be successful in academic residency and in the program overall.

Discussion

This qualitative study returned three emergent themes that reflect first-year doctoral students’ experiences in developing a scholarly voice within the collaborative cohort model in which respondents are enrolled. Additionally, the themes align closely with the extant literature and theoretical framework referenced above.

Emergent Theme 1: Importance of Feedback to Writing Growth

Austin (2009) and Pare (2010) posited that the transformative process of scholarly writing is a collaborative and social activity. Feedback is a critical component of the collaborative writing process. Further supporting the findings of Austin (2009) and Pare (2010) is program participants’ acknowledgement that peer review, in an open and social context, contributed to the development of a more “critical eye” toward one’s own writing. Collaborative writing experiences also allowed respondents to engage in writing reflection, which is pivotal to the emerging scholar. This is further facilitated by faculty’s creation of a safe and encouraging environment in which students feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback from professors and peers in a group setting (Cotteral, 2011).

Emergent Theme 2: The Nature of Writing as an Iterative Process

Learning the structure for research writing is foundational to the writing process. Holmes et al. (2018) contended that front-loading doctoral programs with academic writing resources and exposure to published scholarship communicates

expectations for doctoral student writing development. Furthermore, it addresses writing anxiety with actionable techniques, thus allowing students to learn the “formula” for effective scholarly writing. Survey respondents referenced that concepts, including sentence and paragraph structure and foundational grammatical and mechanical elements of writing are crucial to the iterative process of developing a scholarly voice.

Emergent Theme 3: Establishing Publication as a Motivation for Writing Improvement

Giving new doctoral students opportunities to publish in the first year of study is rare (Holmes et al., 2018). When asked about concerns to pursue doctoral study, students noted that a lack of a vision for the program caused anxiety. However, survey respondents expressed that faculty had a vision of early publication, and this part of the vision worked as a motivating factor to be successful in academic residency and in the program overall. Not only does this theme support the literature, but also supports the theory of cognitive apprenticeship, which holds that tacit processes, such as those associated with scholarly writing, can be demystified when an expert (faculty member) collaborates with a novice (student) to produce a publishable work of literature.

Implications and Future Research

Emergent themes present implications for doctoral students, faculty, and programs. Feedback may take varying forms: direct, individual, collective, written, and verbal. As feedback is considered critical to the development of a scholarly voice, embedding this element into course assignments, from both student and faculty perspectives, may prove useful to the writing process. Additionally, the iterative nature of writing requires development of academic stamina as students engage in revision and editing processes that impact all scholarly writing products. Moreover, understanding that publication is a motivating factor for writing improvement, doctoral programs may move toward student-faculty collaboration in writing articles for journals, e-books, and conferences.

Recommendations for future research related to scholarly voice development include the following topics:

- Examination of the influence of publishing experiences as a doctoral student on post-graduation publishing efforts
- Comparison of publishing experiences as a singular author or as part of an author group
- Examination of the influence of publication on career advancement
- Exploration of the challenges of publishing in a post-graduation context

A common challenge among students entering doctoral programs is the steep learning curve to quickly, yet effectively, develop scholarly writing skills. Research indicated that a pedagogy incorporating collaborative writing opportunities and fostering a peer review culture contributes to the development of writing skills. This study examined doctoral students' self-assessment of scholarly writing skills development in the context of a collaborative writing experience during academic residency. The results indicate that this pedagogy was beneficial to students' development as scholarly writers. As such, the researchers recommend collaborative writing activities and peer review critique sessions as pedagogical techniques for doctoral and other programs in which writing is a required core competency.

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